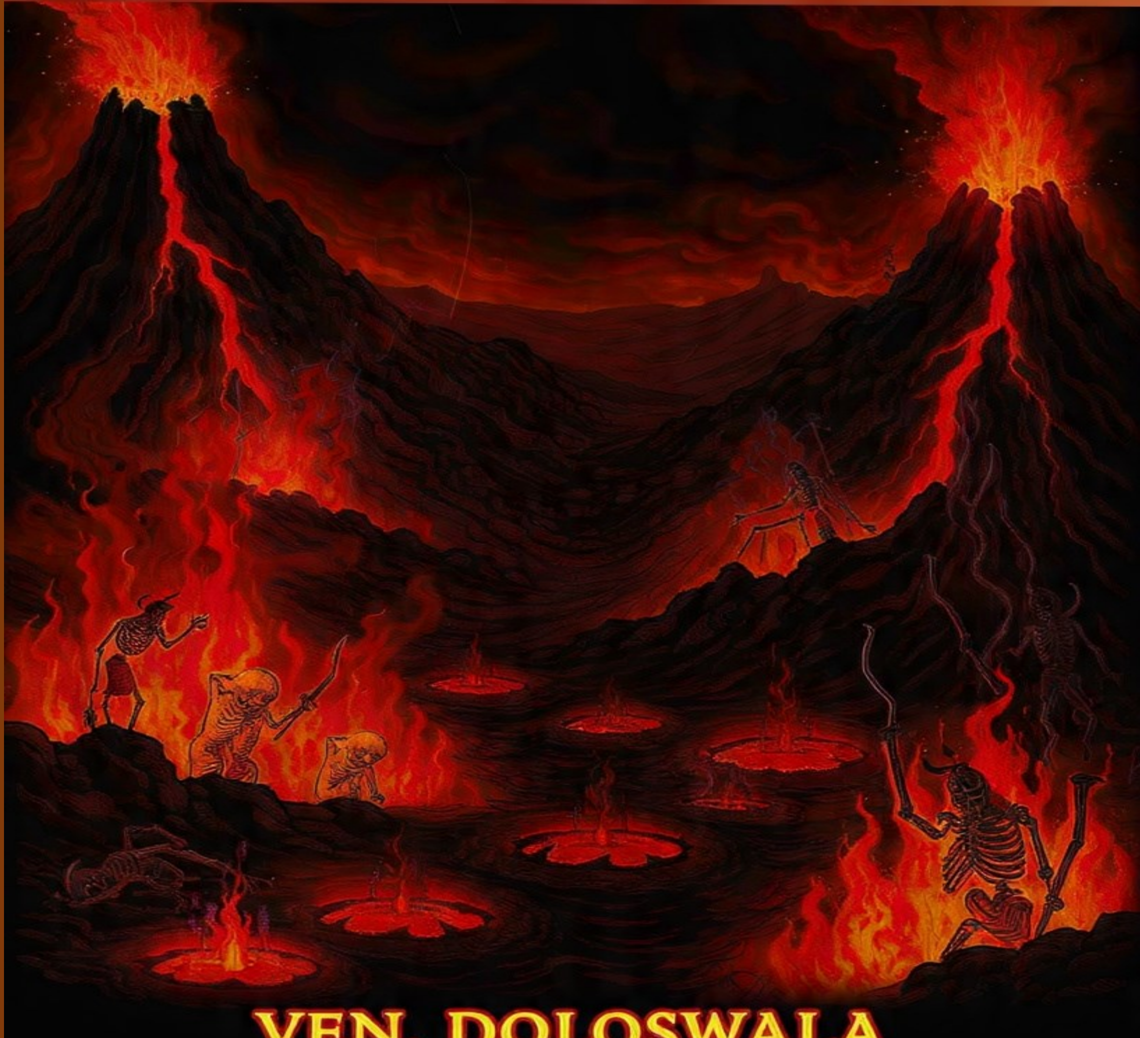
The Eight Great Hells(Āta Maha Niraya)



VEN. DOLOSWALA UDITHADEERA THERO

Sabbatānaṁ Dhamma dānaṁ Jināti

(The Gift of Dhamma Excels All Gifts)

Providing support or giving something to others is known as **'Sangaha'** (hospitality or sharing). Providing physical necessities such as food, drinks, and clothing is called **'Āmisa-sangaha'** (material sharing). Providing the Dhamma (the Buddha's teachings) to someone's life is called **'Dhamma-sangaha'** (sharing of the Dhamma). The Blessed One (The Buddha) expounded in the *Anguttara Nikaya* that among both material sharing and the sharing of the Dhamma, the sharing of the Dhamma is indeed the supreme.

May these merits be received by our beloved father, **Mr. B. Gnanadasa**! May his afterlife be fortunate, filled with abundance, and may his journey through Samsara be peaceful! May the fiery sufferings of Samsara be extinguished, and may he attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana!

We respectfully transfer these merits to the Most Venerable **Kadangoda Samitha Mahanayaka Thero**, the Most Venerable Chief Prelate (Mahanayaka), holder of the Tripitakacharya and Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degrees, of the Iddamalgoda Vihara Sector of the Amarapura Maha Nikaya. We also offer our respectful merits to the Chief Sanghanayaka of the Kukulu Dekooralaya, the Most Venerable **Ratnapure Seevali Nayaka Thero** (Master of Arts); to our respected teacher and the Registrar of our Nikaya, the Venerable **Delwala Muditha Nayaka Thero**; to the Judicial Chief Prelate (Adhikaranasanga Nayaka), the Venerable **Willambe Amitha Nayaka Thero** (Bachelor of Arts - Honours); and to the Computer work and book preparation Venerable **Meepagama Sangharatana Thero**. Our grateful transfer of merits is also extended to the Venerable **Kalawane**

Sanghamajee Thero and the Venerable **Delwala Saranasiri Thero**, who helped in various ways.

Furthermore, we transfer merits to the Honorable President, Secretary, Treasurer, and all devotees of the **Dhammadassi Buddhist Centre**, as well as to everyone who provides the monthly and Poya day alms (Dana), and all those who contributed to this noble endeavor.

May all these merits conduce to your well-being in this world, to a happy rebirth in the next world, and ultimately lead to the realization of the peaceful and supreme Bliss of Nibbana!

By the Editor:

Venerable **Doloswala Udithadheera Thero,**

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The Eight Great Hells (Ata Mahā Niraya)

What is Hell (Niraya)?

Hell is defined as a realm entirely devoid of happiness, where beings undergo immense suffering. It is mentioned in the teachings that the first hell is situated fifteen thousand Yodunas beneath the earth.

An Analysis of the Location of Hell

The planet Earth is a celestial body whose physical depth does not extend as deep as fifteen thousand Yodunas. Accordingly, it is logical to assume that these hell realms exist on a completely separate planet or celestial plane, an idea that does not contradict the core Dhamma. However, this remains my personal perspective.

The Eight Great Hells

According to the teachings of the Supreme Buddha, there are eight main hell realms. They are:

1. **Sanjīva** Hell
1. **Kālasūtra** Hell
1. **Sanghāta** Hell
1. **Raurava** Hell
1. **Mahā Raurava** Hell
1. **Tāpa** Hell

1. **Pratāpa** Hell

1. **Avīci** Hell

The Nature of Sanjīva Hell

The first among these hells is named **'Sanjīva'**. No matter how much torture a being born here undergoes, their body is repeatedly and fully reconstituted according to their Karma; hence, this realm is called 'Sanjīva' (the hell of re-animation).

Beings born here are chopped and sliced into pieces by the wardens of hell (Yamapallas). Once cut into pieces, their bodies are instantly restored to their original, complete form due to the power of their Karma. Then, the hell-wardens chop them into pieces all over again, repeating the cycle.

Lifespan

The lifespan in the Sanjīva Hell is calculated as follows:

- Ninety-lakh (9 million) human years equal the lifespan of a deity in the *Chātummahārājika* heaven.

- That entire lifespan of nine million years constitutes just **one single day** in Sanjīva Hell.

- Thirty such days make a month.

- Twelve such months make a year.

- The maximum lifespan in this realm is **five hundred** such years.

Demeritorious Actions (Akusala) Leading to Rebirth in this Hell

Beings who commit sins such as killing living beings, stealing, and sexual misconduct while overwhelmed by greed (Lobha), hatred (Dosa), and delusion (Moha) are reborn here.

Furthermore, the Dhamma states that those who unrighteously cause suffering to the living beings of the world, and those who instigate wars and conflicts filled with hatred and cruelty toward others, are destined for rebirth in this Sanjīva Hell.

The Kālasūtra Hell

The second among the eight great hells is the **Kālasūtra** Hell. This is located fifteen thousand Yodunas beneath the Sanjīva Hell. Beings born in this hell are flung onto a blazing iron ground, where they are measured with black strings (like a carpenter's line) and then chopped, sliced, and hacked into various shapes using burning iron wedges, adzes, and axes. Because the power of their demeritorious karma is so potent, their bodies are repeatedly reconstituted to their original state according to their karma. Over and over again, the hell-wardens continue to chop and split their bodies. The suffering endured by a being born here is beyond what the mind can conceive or words can describe.

Beings Born in the Kālasūtra Hell

Those who commit crimes against their parents—such as insulting, abusing, character assassinating, driving them out of their homes, and failing to provide them with necessary food and drinks at the proper time—are reborn in the Kālasūtra Hell.

Similarly, beings who disrespect, insult, and inflict physical torture upon their teachers are also reborn here.

Beings who insult, abuse, character assassinate, assault, drive away, and torture the elders of their own family—such as mother-in-law, father-in-law, elder brother, or elder sister—arrive at rebirth in the Kālasūtra Hell by the power of that demeritorious karma.

Those who insult and abuse the poor, travelers, helpless people, and beggars, as well as those who assault them, oppress them, and rob them of their possessions, are also born in this hell.

Those who deceive the living beings of the world by telling lies are likewise born in this hell.

Lifespan in this Hell

- Three crore and sixty lakh (36 million) of our human years equal just **one single day** in the Kālasūtra Hell.
- Thirty such days make a month.
- Twelve such months make a year.
- The maximum lifespan in this realm is **one thousand** such years.

The Sanghāta Hell

Beings born in this hell find themselves trapped, sunk into a burning iron ground. They have no ability to move around or run away. Massive, blazing iron mountains come rolling toward them and crush these beings. Caught beneath these mountains, the beings are completely crushed into powder. Yet, due to the power

of their demeritorious karma, they are repeatedly reconstituted to their original form according to their karma. Then, the iron mountain comes rolling back again, crushing them to powder once more under the blazing weight. This immense agony is endured for as long as they live there. This realm is known as the **Sanghāta** Hell (the hell of crushing).

Beings Born in the Sanghāta Hell

Beings who assault others with branches, sticks, clubs, and weapons, as well as those who inflict suffering and cruelty upon animals such as elephants, horses, cattle, and buffaloes, are reborn in the Sanghāta Hell.

Lifespan in this Hell

- Fourteen crore and forty lakh (144 million) of our human years equal just **one single day** in this hell.
- Thirty of those days make a month.
- Twelve such months make a year.
- The maximum lifespan in this hell is **two thousand** such years.

The Raurava Hell In this hell realm, blazing flames penetrate into the inte
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The Great Avīci Hell and Its Nature

The most agonizing and wretched hell realm, where beings burn and scorch continuously without a single moment of interruption amidst roaring flames, is known as **Avīci**.

Demeritorious Actions (Akusala) Leading to Rebirth Here:

Beings who commit the gravest sins—namely, killing one's mother, killing one's father, killing an Arahant, wounding a Supreme Buddha with a malicious intent to shed His blood, causing a schism in the Sangha (community of monks), and destroying monasteries, stupas, Bodhi trees, or Buddha statues belonging to the Triple Gem—are reborn in the Avīci Hell.

Lifespan and Structure:

The lifespan in the Great Avīci Hell lasts for **one full Antah-Kalpa** (an intermediate aeon).

According to the descriptions, the structure of the eight great hells is square-shaped. The length, width, and height of this hell are approximately one hundred Yodunas each. The thickness of each of its walls is nine Yodunas. The iron ground and the iron lid above possess the exact same thickness. From the very day the Kalpa (aeon) began, flames have burned incessantly within this hell, filling the entire space. **The hell-beings themselves act as the fuel**; that is, they serve as the fuel to ignite and sustain the fire.

(This profound explanation heavily underscores the terrifying consequences of demeritorious karma to the reader.)

The Futile Attempt to Escape

A hell-being suffering severely in this great hell, thinking, "I shall escape from this hell," runs from the western direction toward the eastern direction. It appears to him as though the eastern gate is standing wide open. He runs desperately toward the east. After running for many hundreds of years, he finds that the eastern gateway is actually shut tightly. Even while running, his skin burns, his flesh burns, and his bones burn; the fire penetrates right through to his bone marrow. Due to the power of his karma, his body is instantly restored, only to burn all over again as he continues to run.

When he halts near the eastern gateway, the hell-wardens arrive. These wardens subject him to various forms of excruciating torture. They drive iron spikes into both his hands, both his feet, and his chest to inflict severe agony. Taking sharp saws, they saw off his limbs, which instantly grew back due to his karma, only to be sawed off again. Subsequently, they bind him like an ox to a blazing chariot. The hell-wardens climb onto the blazing chariot and force him to drag it across the burning iron ground, beating and torturing him continuously. This is merely a tiny fraction of the boundless agony endured by a being born in this hell.

After spending a long time in this state, he notices that the western gateway appears to be open. Just as before, he runs for hundreds and thousands of years to reach that gateway. However, as he approaches, the gate shuts closed. The hell-wardens arrive at that spot and torture him in the same manner as before. In this way, from time to time, he keeps running from one direction to another, only to face intense suffering at each gateway.

The Minor Hells (Osupath Naraka)

After a long epoch, the eastern gateway opens once again. He runs through it and escapes outside. However, upon stepping

outside, he falls directly into an **Osupath Naraka** (a minor or satellite hell). These minor hells are situated parallel to and surrounding every single gateway. There are four minor hells adjacent to each gateway, totaling sixteen minor hells surrounding a single great hell. Across all eight great hells, the total number of minor hells is one hundred and twenty-eight (128). When combined with the eight main great hells, there are **one hundred and thirty-six (136) hells in total**.

The Animal Realm (Tirisan Apāya)

Beings who are utterly incapable of realizing the Stages of Enlightenment (Magga-phala), and because of that very reason, possess a downward tendency driven constantly by sensual thoughts and burning fear, are known by the name **'Tiracchāna'** (animals). If a being acts under the deep delusion of ignorance (Moha) and commits demeritorious deeds, such a being is most often reborn as an animal in the animal world.

There are vast variations and classifications among animals. Some are visible to the naked eye, while others are invisible. Some animals possess long bodies, some are short, and some are of medium size. Some are massive, while others are microscopic and subtle.

Furthermore, there are:

- **Aṇḍaja**: animals born from eggs.
- **Jalābuja**: animals born from a womb.
- **Saṁsedaja**: animals born in moisture or damp environments.

- **Opapātika**: animals born spontaneously with fully formed bodies according to their karma.

- **Apādaka**: footless animals.

- **Dvipādaka**: two-footed animals.

- **Catuspādaka**: four-footed animals.

- **Bahuppādaka**: many-footed animals. Thus, various classifications of animals can be observed.

The Hungry Ghost Realm (Preta Apāya)

A class of beings who are completely devoid of any happiness are called **'Pretas'** (hungry ghosts). The Commentaries (Atthakathā) state: *"Sukhato itogatāti petā"*, meaning they are called Pretas because they are inherently departed from happiness. Among these ghosts, there are various types known by names such as ***Nijjhāmataṇhika**, **Khuppipāsika, Paṁsu Pisācaka, Paradattupajīvī, Kālakafjaka**, **Saṅkalika,** and **Maṁsapiṇḍika***.

Classification of Pretas

- **Nijjhāmataṇhika Pretas**: These are ghosts with raging flames burning inside their bodies. Just as a tree is consumed by a fire ignited within its hollow, flames burn from the inside of their bodies, causing them to undergo immense agony.

- **Khuppipāsika Pretas**: These are ghosts who suffer from extreme hunger and thirst through thousands of inter-buddha aeons (Buddha-antara), failing to receive even a

drop of bodily wastes like excrement, urine, phlegm, saliva, snot, blood, or pus.

- **Paṁsu Pisācaka Pretas**: These are ghosts born in places such as soil mounds, garbage heaps, cesspits, mountain slopes, streams, and riverbanks.

- **Paradattupajīvī Pretas**: These are ghosts who sustain themselves on what is given by others (by rejoicing in shared merits).

An Inquiry Into the Sharing of Merits

Can all Pretas receive the merits shared by their relatives from their past lives? No, not all Pretas can receive merits. The reason for this is expounded in the *Tirokuḍḍa Sutta*:

"Pahūtē annapānamhi - khajjabhōjjē upaṭṭhitē

Na tēsaṁ kōci sarati - sattānaṁ kammapaccayā"

Relatives may possess abundant food and drinks, and they may have the strength and means to perform acts of charity (Almsgiving). Yet, they do not remember and transfer merits to their deceased relatives. The root cause of this is the demeritorious karma of those ghosts. According to this discourse, it is clear that ghosts with heavily bound demeritorious karma cannot receive merits.

Some Dhamma preachers claim that only the class of ghosts named 'Paradattupajīvī' can receive merits. This is truly incorrect. Although the specialized Dhamma texts mention 'Paradattupajīvī' as a separate category, according to the *Jāṇussoṇi Sutta* of the *Anguttara Nikaya*, all ghosts who receive merits and subsist on the merits given by others can broadly be referred to by the epithet 'Paradattupajīvī'. Accordingly, it becomes clear that beings across various categories of Pretas have the capacity to receive merits. Nevertheless, based on the verse cited from the *Tirokuḍḍa Sutta*, it must be specially emphasized that when demeritorious karma is extremely heavy, ghosts are barred from receiving merits.

- **Atthisaṅkalika Pretas**: There is a class of ghosts who stand about three Gavuvas (approx. 7-8 miles) tall, completely devoid of blood and flesh, possessing skeletons covered merely by skin and sinews. They are called 'Atthisaṅkalika'. Covered only by skin over bone and sinew, they suffer intensely. The Dhamma notes that in their past lives, they committed demeritorious acts such as slaughtering birds or animals.

- **Maṁsapiṇḍika Pretas**: There is also a class of ghosts whose bodies resemble a mere lump of rotten meat.

The Asura Realm (Asura Apāya)

The Asura realm actually refers to the class of ghosts known as **Kālakafjaka**. There is a segment of ghosts born in the void between three world-systems (Cakravāṭa), enveloped in absolute, dense darkness that never receives sunlight or moonlight, constantly tormented by piercing cold, and surrounded by terrifying oceanic waters that can shatter their bodies. They are called Kālakafjaka. These Kālakafjaka ghosts themselves are

recognized by the name 'Asura'. The Asura Realm is another name for this state.

Causes for Rebirth in the Preta and Asura Realms

Beings are reborn in the Preta and Asura states if they commit the following actions:

- Failing to practice charity (Dana) from what they earn, envying others, living with excessive greed, and hiding their wealth due to miserliness.
- Committing the Ten Demeritorious Actions (Dasa Akusala).
- Blocking the gains, honors, and hospitality intended for others.
- Acting without a sense of moral shame (Hiri) and moral dread (Ottappa) toward their parents.
- Obstructing the meritorious deeds of others.
- Insulting and abusing others by telling them to "eat excrement and urine".
- Unrighteously oppressing fellow villagers.
- Going astray through the four wrong paths (Four Agati: prejudice due to desire, hatred, fear, and delusion).
- Accepting bribes.

The General Plight of Pretas

Every single ghost suffers continuously from hunger and thirst. They possess emaciated bodies, massive heads, and prominent skeletons. They consume saliva, phlegm, snot, cough wastes, excrement, urine, lumps of flesh, and carcasses. They have coarse hair, body fur, claws, and teeth. They remain completely naked and look utterly terrifying. Their mouths are as tiny as the eye of a needle, and their eyes bulge outward like the eyes of a crab. They bear lumps of meat hanging from their nostrils all the way down to their feet. When they consume food or drink, they must place it upon their heads to eat or drink. They attack and stab one another with blazing iron clubs, and they suck blood and pus.

Thus, the suffering endured by Pretas cannot be fully measured. Only a Fully Enlightened Supreme Buddha possesses the capacity to give a complete description of the Preta realm.

Contemplating the immense suffering of the Preta world—which is so horrifyingly agonizing that merely hearing or thinking about it causes pain to the chest—one must act diligently day and night to escape this realm by engaging in the Ten Meritorious Actions (Dasa Punriya Kriya) such as Charity (Dana), Morality (Sila), and Meditation (Bhavana). One must strive to achieve human bliss, heavenly bliss, and ultimately, the bliss of Nibbana.

The Tripitaka Dhamma mentions two specific ghosts named **Asilōma** and **Sūcilōma**. The ghost who possesses hair pores as sharp as swords is named 'Asilōma'. Similarly, the ghost who possesses hair pores as sharp as the tips of needles is named 'Sūcilōma'. The lifespan of ghosts born in the Preta world cannot be defined by a set number of years; they continue to endure severe torment in the Preta world for as long as their committed demeritorious karma remains unexhausted.

Dedicated for the Sharing of the Dhamma

(Dhamma Dāna Piṇisa)

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